

ARIZONA STATE HABITAT PARTNERSHIP COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF JULY 30, 2010
Arizona Game and Fish Department Region 1 Office – Pinetop, AZ

Present:

Jack Husted, AZ Game and Fish Commission
Jim deVos, AZ Elk Society
Steve Clark, AZ Elk Society
Tom Mackin, Coconino Sportsmen
Bob Vahle, AZ Wildlife Federation
Tom Bagley, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Amber Munig, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Dave Cagle, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Bill Masters, Rocky Mtn Elk Foundation
Brian Wakeling, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Bruce Sitko, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Jon Cooley, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Ron Thompson, AZ Game and Fish Dept.

Clair Harris, Coconino Sportsmen
Dave McCasland, AZ Desert Bighorn Sheep Society
Curt Steinke, AZ Desert Bighorn Sheep Society
Steve Najar, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Al Eiden, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Ben Brochu, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Bob Meulengracht, Mule Deer Foundation
Dennis Humphrey, State Land Dept.
Natalie Robb, AZ Game and Fish Dept.
Beth Humphrey, Apache Sitgreaves National Forest
Bill Noble, Kaibab National Forest
Rob Lever, Clifton Ranger District
Travis Thompson, Clifton Ranger District

State Habitat Partnership Committee Chairman Commissioner J.W. Harris was unable to be at the meeting due to prior commitments. Commissioner Jack Husted sat in for Commissioner Harris.

Introductions and Commissioner's Roll Call of Local HPCs

Each person present introduced themselves to the group. The representatives of the local HPCs present were:

Springerville/Alpine – Bill Masters
Show Low and Winslow – Bob Birkeland
Forage Resource Study Group – Dennis Humphrey
Williams/Flagstaff – Tom Mackin
Kingman – no representative
Prescott – Tom Bagley

Southwest – no representative
Safford – Steve Najar
Tucson – Ben Brochu
Sierra Vista/Douglas – Ben Brochu
Payson Natural Resources Committee – Natalie Robb

Agenda Review – Ron Thompson

Ron reviewed the meeting agenda and asked if there would be any changes or additions. Brian Wakeling asked from about ten minutes to give updates.

Approval of the Minutes from the Meeting of February 26, 2010 – All

Tom Mackin moved to approve minutes from February meeting. Clair Harris seconded and the motion carried.

Clifton Ranger District – Presentation on the Sunset Habitat Restoration Project

Rob Lever conducted a PowerPoint presentation on the progress of the project. Some highlights:

Blocks A and B are completed. During the burning of Block A, a weather forecast of 15 MPH winds turned out to be 50 MPH winds instead, creating a bit of concern for the crew. Consequently, the black line became a

treatment burn. Seven thousand acres were burned. Snakeweed was eradicated. There was a follow up of aerial ignition in some of the steeper terrain, but most of the planned burn area was already burned.

Block B was burned in January, 2010. Both Blocks A and B are accessible by ATV, helicopter or horse only, which limits some options.

Block C thinning - 1,234 acres have been thinned.

Rob wanted the group to know that the work undertaken by the Clifton RD has really survived due to the Special Tag money from the HPC being used as match for the Federal funds. The 90,000 acres treated in Block B would not have been treated had it not been for the HPC program and associated Special Big Game Tag funds.

Kudos were given to the Clifton RD for their aggressive plans in habitat treatments and it was observed that if more ranger districts in Arizona's national forests were the same, the whole state would be in better shape.

Feedback from Survey on HPC Guidance Documents – Jim deVos

After the winter meeting, a subcommittee was formed to examine potential improvements and clarifications of the HPC project process. While participants at the winter meeting all agreed that the process was working well, there were always opportunities to get better.

Jim deVos presented feedback received from a survey he sent out earlier during the spring. Jim stated that he was asked to assist by Wildlife Conservation Organizations (WCOs) because of his familiarity with the Department and WCOs.

Both Department and external participants seem to have similar concerns about the HPC process. The purpose of this subcommittee is to identify process improvements to smooth the HPC project approval process. This process is a decision process that involves the Department and the WCOs who raise the big game tag funds generated by the sale of the tags awarded to them by the Commission. Points made:

- The key is to focus on the benefits of the HPC and Big Game Tag Fund,
- Turnover of personnel in the Department and the NGO board members creates confusion,
- Role and function of participants is not always well defined,
- Some inconsistencies exist in prioritization,
- An opportunity to define common priorities,

The subcommittee hopes to develop a written document that would capture project elements and record operational approaches to be used in carrying the program forward in a collaborative fashion.

Approach:

The subcommittee is composed of 7 members. They developed a questionnaire which was sent to 21 individuals, all of whom responded to the survey. The Department is interested in using big game tag funds to capture match, from a variety of granting entities, including the Arizona Department of Agriculture and the National Forest Foundation, among others.

The two areas of inquiry that the survey sought to get at were:

- Issuance of tags – The group was reminded that this is outside the purview of HPC authority. The Commission has sole discretion and decision making authority for determining which WCOs are awarded tags.

- Selection of projects – The issues identified include: No standardized priority list for proposals, out of cycle project submissions have additional complications and may benefit from closer scrutiny, no clear mechanism (or understanding) to capture true matching abilities vs. cost share, a better notification system regarding project funding awards, and incomplete project proposals or proposals submitted in the wrong format.

The HPC guidance document should include the history of the program, a timeline chart for the annual process and the most current HPC project proposal form.

Points of discussion following the presentation:

- So far this is idea gathering, some of which have already been proposed or are in place. Additional dialogue is needed.
- Reinforce the pre-proposal process, which could make things easier for the WCO funding partners. It is still listed as part of the timeline, but it doesn't happen regularly.
- One place to find all pertinent information and documents should be the HPC web page on the Department's website.
- The scoring and prioritization of projects should consider the access component.
- Volunteer labor should be considered as match using the formula for the value of volunteer labor. It was noted that there is a legal definition for "match" in the federal granting process. A lot of proposals refer to "match" but it is really cost share. A good proposal would indicate at least a \$2 cost share for every dollar of special tag money.
- Instead of split funding projects, perhaps the WCOs would consider solely funding individual projects as trade-offs. For instance, if two projects list deer and elk as species to benefit, the elk groups may consider funding one, while the deer group may consider funding the other.
- There is a lot of expertise at the HPC level. It should be captured in the document to stress the need and use of the local HPCs in the process, even before the WCOs see a proposal.
- In the introduction, include a roadmap to success, with steps.
- Encourage a culture that holds proponents responsible for submitting complete and accurate proposals.
- Projects with archaeological and NEPA compliance not completed should be put to the bottom of the pile. Ideally, compliance work should be completed even before the proposals make it to the committees.

Jim asked the group to submit any further ideas to either him or Brian Wakeling. Brian stated that the subcommittee should have some draft documents ready to present at the February 2011 meeting.

4 Forests Restoration Initiative (4-FRI) – Bill Noble, Wildlife Biologist, USFS

Bill Noble introduced himself to the group. He is the former biologist on the Kaibab National Forest. He conducted a PowerPoint presentation on the initiative, the four forests being the northern Arizona forests, Kaibab, Coconino, Tonto, and Apache-Sitgreaves. Description: The Southwestern Region (AZ and NM) of the Forest Service is in the beginning stage of a large, multi-year forest restoration project in central Arizona. The project objective is to restore ponderosa pine forest types by thinning and harvesting mainly small diameter trees in excess of ecological requirements. Restoration would occur initially in the Williams, AZ to Flagstaff, AZ area. The area will be further defined during the collaborative planning process. Ultimately, over the next planning phases, restoration would occur across at least four Arizona national forests on what is called the Mogollon Rim consisting of mostly ponderosa pine and dry mixed conifer forests. *(Description courtesy of USFS service <http://www.azfrp.com/Downloadable%20files/USFS%20R3%20Sources%20Sought%20Notice%20April%2023,%202009.pdf>)*

The CHALLENGE:

- Thinning and prescribed burning of 724,000 acres from the Tusayan area to near Flagstaff in the first phase
- Retain site specificity
- Conduct NEPA quality effects analysis
- Working collaboratively with different entities and stakeholders

The entire project area would run from the south rim of the Grand Canyon, south and east to the project border along the Mogollon Rim, approximately 2.4 million acres and only in ponderosa pine forest. Defining treatment areas would be based on stakeholders' landscape strategies, many different stakeholders, using GIS-based filters applied to each watershed to identify proprietary areas for treatments, either thinning or prescribed burning, as well as areas with treatment restrictions or no treatments.

For defining treatment areas the GIS layers will include, species, fire suppression, the spectrum of treatments, treatments based on existing conditions and matched to desired conditions. 4-FRI has not yet discussed desired conditions as a group. How do you define restoration? Actions taken will be site specific, such as building temporary roads, road improvements, road decommissioning and road obliteration. Proposed actions should define how to achieve desired conditions, as well as how monitoring the results will be integrated. This is a multi-year project. Currently the four forests average 17,000 acres per year in treatments. They would like to expand this to 30,000 acres. They are also looking at a range of treatment options and assess which ones will have the greatest expected impact. This may include the development of one or more burn plans or silviculture prescriptions.

There is also a need to develop "analysis framework" for each resource. This includes ensuring coordination among specialists, a review of methods, and inclusion of all available and appropriate data. The inherent challenges to be considered include: adequate cumulative effects, the ability to withstand legal challenges, and clear communication with all stakeholders and with the public.

Henry Provencio is the team lead for 4 FRI landscape strategy. The contract is expected to be issued in late 2011 with the first task orders sent out in 2012.

This project will involve industry engagement and determining the role of landscape strategy planning at innovative scales. Communication, monitoring and adaptive management and funding will be the key components.

For more information contact the team lead Provencio; wildlife biologist, Bill Noble; Silviculturist Neil McCusker; or fire ecologist Mary Lata

Q&A:

Why is the project starting on the west side, when the priority area is the White Mountains? White Mountain Stewardship was in at the beginning is represented in the planning process.

What about litigation against the project? The Center for Biological Diversity and several other interested entities attend every stakeholder meeting and are fully engaged, although the Forest Supervisors realize they might lose any voluntary participant. NEPA needs to be sound enough to withstand any challenges. At present, many groups are at the table, but it can't be determined if they will be a year from now. There is contingency planning for this through NEPA.

What groups do you envision that will help the process? Simply conjecture, but a large stakeholder group like the HPC could make your voice known to the members. Meetings are held monthly, alternating every other month east or west. There will most likely be stewardship contracting. There are several good organizations to coordinate with. As we go through NEPA, it's a labyrinth. It's unknown how the science and monitoring will play out. A group could help design a project and help see it through to implementation. Attend the public meetings and give suggestions. For instance, on the Kaibab, pronghorn connectivity is an issue. This is something that can be worked into the planning.

Is there enough industry to handle the work covering this huge area? The timing will be important. We must first complete the analysis and then move to the contracts. The need will be to show commitment to industry ahead of time.

Southeast Arizona Grasslands Initiative – Ben Brochu

This group has recently taken shape with a core group of stakeholders – AGFD, Pima County, Altar Valley Conservation Alliance (group of local ranchers), and Arizona Antelope Foundation. The group's intentions are to address the habitat issues on more of a landscape scale approach to restore grasslands. They have formed a workgroup and are working a partnership with Pima County and the Department to clean tanks. Buenos Aires NWR is also a partner. Tentative plans include burning, mechanical treatments, and seeding. There is also a big access tie in. In Unit 36C, a lot of public land is landlocked. Since they've become a workgroup, they've become eligible for other funding sources. Ben will get with John Windes, the Department's Region 5 Habitat Specialist for the group, for future updates.

Past Year's HPC Efforts / Native American Fish and Wildlife HPC Opportunities – Ron Thompson

For HPC project funding, there is a recommendation for funding sideboards and priorities by species with agreement between the Department and the WCO funding partners. The Department is pleased to see more involvement of the WCOs in the HPCs. A reminder – feedback about the semi-annual HPC Newsletter indicates that the newsletter is a great communication tool and Ron encouraged all HPCs to submit items to be included in it. It's YOUR newsletter!

Last year's project proposals are posted to the HPC website on website and the list of funded projects appears in the June 2010 newsletter. In 2009, requests for Special Big Game Tag funds for projects were approximately 7 million dollars. The program continues to become more competitive. In considering funding for last year's proposals, access was a priority, as was a minimum of one to one match.

We are in the second year of offering Special Mountain lion tags. One of the mountain lion projects is an education project in coordination with University of Arizona called Project CAT.

A considerable amount of tag funds were used in the last few years for the purchase of trail cameras. The Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society has funded the purchase of over 200 cameras and a daunting amount of data was being collected. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service granted funds to the University of Arizona to hire a person to analyze the data. Camera traps also give information on predator-prey relationships, mountain lion activity at water holes, and to determine mountain lion densities. Camera traps set for determining mountain lion densities are not placed on waters, as this would bias the data.

Ron, as HPC coordinator, would like the group to start thinking about using HPC funds on tribal lands. The Navajo Nation has about 25 sheep to translocate off the nation. Ron recently presented to several Native American agencies about the HPC/Special Tag program history including dollars spent and WCOs involved. Discussion with these agencies involved how they could clearly state their objectives and coordinate with local

AGFD regions. There is interest in habitat treatments and creating corridors. It is important to note that tribal lands represent most of the unfragmented habitat in the state.

There is a need to use HPC funds prudently in light of future development for solar, wind, and transportation projects. Also the value of HPC funds for research projects cannot be understated. Funds were used this year in collaboration with the Boquillas on a predator management project. Informal observations indicate that antelope recruitment in areas where coyotes were removed was higher than at untreated areas. Special tag funds have also paid for recent DNA studies for bears and lions and are valuable in getting a feel for connectivity between populations. Genetic work has paid huge rewards on the Kofa. Collared animals provide data on predation rates, as does fecal analysis, also funded by Special Tag funds.

It was mentioned that it was not a wise idea to say no funding in limited elk areas for projects in limited opportunity or population management elk areas, because there is a lot of work that could be done in these areas that benefits wildlife. Brian stated that there is often a confusion of terms in describing these areas and what the management objectives. He explained the difference between population management, limited opportunity, limited population, winter range and standard management areas.

The Department manages elk in three differing zones: standard, winter range, and limited elk population zones. Standard zones are those areas where elk were historically present yearlong. Winter range zones are areas where elk are expected to spend the winter (especially severe winters), yet yearlong presence may be undesirable. Limited populations zones are further categorized into those areas where we don't want elk to be (e.g., Kaibab) and those areas where we don't want elk populations to expand beyond low numbers (e.g., Prescott Valley).

Hunts have their own nomenclature. Limited opportunity hunts are designated so that hunters are not misled to believe that typical hunt success may be experienced in the area, but in some instances these hunts are implemented within standard management zones (e.g., Canyon Creek in Unit 23). Population management hunts are used to respond in rapid fashion within areas where elk abundance may be an issue (e.g., winter range management zones).

Simply because a population management or limited opportunity hunt is held within an area, it does not explicitly indicate that this is an area where no elk are desired or where elk habitat management may not increase the number of elk an area can support. However, it would probably be unrealistic to assume funds expended in an area that was being managed for few to no elk would ever allow for the benefit of elk.

The WCOs have concerns about expending funds to grow elk in an area where the Department is trying to limit their populations. Brian explained that in some instances this still may be appropriate. RMEF funded habitat restoration work around Round Valley using their Project Advisory Committee funds this year. RMEF understood that despite this work, the Department may still recommend population reductions in that area until such time as the habitat responds in capacity. These funds were well spent, yet there is no immediate benefit to increased elk populations. Portions of Unit 27 have seen some elk population growth recently, which was certainly influenced by the investment in habitat enhancement in years past.

Annual HPC Recognition Awards – Ron Thompson

This year's Outstanding HPC is the Sierra Vista/Douglas HPC. Duane Aubuchon accepted the award on behalf of the group. The Outstanding WCO is the National Wild Turkey Federation. The award will be passed on to the organization, as there was no representative at the meeting.

On a side note, the group applauded Steve Clark, President of the Arizona Elk Society, who was recently recognized as the Outstanding Citizen Wildlife Volunteer at the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) meeting in Alaska.

Success Stories

Bill Masters for Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) - RMEF funded \$40,000 toward burn projects which leveraged federal dollars. They also funded the Dogtown project and conducted three small game camps. The RMEF Tucson chapter netted the highest amount raised at a banquet in the nation, over \$200,000. There were 800 attendees at Tucson's banquet.

Curt Stienke and Dave McCasland for Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society (ADBSS). They settled the Kofa issue, at least temporarily and the NEPA is done. The results of collaring bighorn sheep on the Highway 93 project will be interesting.

Steve Clark for the Arizona Elk Society (AES) – AES funded a grassland project on one of the Babbitt allotments and cut trees with 100 volunteers.

Joe Currie for the AGFD Development Branch - In 2007, 14 of 16 catchments were completed and they are waiting for the completion on the other two. In 2008, 9 of 12 projects were completed, 2 are scheduled and the final one is waiting on NEPA, complicated by its being in a Wilderness Area. In 2009 – 16 were completed, including four that were out of cycle HPC proposals.

Bill Masters for the Springerville/Alpine HPC – the group has been working on water projects. There is nothing going on in Alpine as yet.

Bob Birkeland for the Show Low and Winslow HPCs – It's been a slow year. On the Wescott water project Special Tag dollars funded the project, built by contractor, and within a week it was receiving heavy use by elk and deer. There are elk issues in Unit 4BN near Dry Lake due to a crop change made by a new lessee. Last year, the lessee approached the Department about stewardship funding. They then put 500 cattle on the allotment and the first survey found no elk. Two weeks later there were 15 elk. Obviously the stewardship agreement will be discontinued. In previous years the surveys would count about 250 elk on the allotment.

The Lakeside and Black Mesa Ranger Districts have not allowed to do any work to be carried out in the Rodeo-Chediski fire area yet. The Winslow HPC cleaned several tanks and all full and holding water. They wanted to also repairing some existing trick tanks, but again, the Black Mesa RD would not allow it, even though it was only to install drinkers.

There are still elk issues in the Little Colorado River area. It is difficult to get hunters in there. There are 60 elk in Winslow that can be hunted by archery only in farm fields. The question was asked if the Department had tried the aggressive notification of bow hunters. Bob replied that it's too small an area to pack with too many hunters at one time.

Tom Mackin for the Williams/Flagstaff HPC – The Region 2 water maintenance project is in the last quarter right now. Members visited 85 waters and did repairs, coming in at budget. Last fall's work included the rebuilding of a water in Unit 7W. The new design, meant to reduce vandalism is working well.

The Ida Grassland project in Unit 9 was started the third week in June, with good progress to date. The project manager from the Kaibab NF, Jeff Waters, is now with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Recent wildfires in the area connect with the treatment area. The Pat Springs Pipeline is running at the rate of 1,000 gallons per hour from the spring, filling tanks along the pipeline and dispersing wildlife. It appears that animals that fled the Schultz fire are also using it.

Two and 8 tenths miles of fence are completed on the Sunset project in Unit 5A. The Hopis said it will be finished soon. It's another project that appears to be coming in under budget.

Natalie Robb for the Payson Natural Resources Committee – Black Mesa Tank is finished, thanks to ADBSS and ADA. It's in a great Rocky Mountain sheep area. The plan is to post cameras on the tank to monitor use.

The Houston Mesa project, which encompasses 1,200 acres, is due to start this fall. The Buckaroo Flats burn near Young is ready, as is the Cherry Creek burn. The forest is waiting for conditions. Five major projects were funded and are on schedule. Steve Clark remarked that a project proposal for a burn north of Cherry Creek should be submitted. The group is looking to possibly propose some burns in the Globe area.

Dennis Humphrey for the Forage Resource Study Group – The group continues to monitor Units 5A and 5B for forage use. The area has had good precipitation this year. Use has been light to moderate. Anderson Mesa is experiencing heavier use on browse, but there is good production of cool season grasses. First quarter of this year had less rain. Things were looking good, but last year's "nonsoon" didn't help the warm season grasses. Most dirt tanks were dry last fall. Most of the projects this year are Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) projects, including tree grinding and a couple of water developments on the Bar T Bar Ranch. The Diablo Trust has been meeting with the Forest Service to iron out issues related to getting clearances for doing projects. A project is upcoming on the Clear Creek Ranch - 12,000 acres of juniper treatment funded by NRCS, WHIP, and AGFD funds. Garret Fabian will propose the complete rebuild of a Forest Service water in Unit 5.

Duane Aubuchon for the Safford HPC – The HPC has a close association with the Southeast Arizona Sportsmen's Club. The group engaged in a volunteer effort to work on tank, built in the 1930s, in the wilderness area, also the turkey transplant area. Re: the Aravaipa Canyon restoration – It's great wildlife habitat right now due to the fact that there has been no livestock grazing for 10 years. The group conducted a few youth camps. NRCS and LIP funds expended this year total about \$360,000. This year they will request an additional \$40-50K. This year's HPC applications will request \$25K in Block C in the Sunset burn area, as well as a water in the Dos Cabezas.

Ben Brochu for the Tucson HPC – Pima County has been actively participating in the HPC. After the September 1 project proposal submission deadline, the plan is to get together with other two regional HPCs (Safford and Sierra Vista/Douglas) to establish priorities. Thanks to ADBSS for cameras in sheep population areas. Ben mentioned the email he'd sent earlier about the granting opportunity through the AZ Department of Commerce. (Here it is for your reference):

"It's called the Agricultural Renewable Energy Conversion Incentive Program found at <http://www.azcommerce.com/Energy/Agricultural+Renewable+Energy.htm> . This program is for agricultural producers looking to convert from fossil fuel driven systems to solar systems. There are a lot of ranchers looking to convert windmills, currently powered by electrical or diesel pumps, to solar powered pumps and it sounds like this would be an ideal fit. The deadline has already passed as there were two rounds, one in January and one in May. However keep this in mind for future projects. This is another way to further cost-share a project and get more bang for our buck."

Tom Bagley for the Prescott HPC – Work was completed on the Tank Car pipeline in Unit 10 on the Big Boquillas. Special tag funding made it possible to do nine miles of pipeline. The relationship value of the project can't be overemphasized. More prescribed burns will be proposed for Unit 19A. The last burns to benefit antelope occurred in the 80s. Prescott will be also be pushing more water redevelopments. Most of the area waters are 40-50 years old. To expedite this, the Prescott National Forest is working to approve NEPA across the forest, not just site specific. Joe Currie mentioned that the Coconino National Forest is looking at doing the same.

Other topics:

Proposition 109 - Commissioner Husted mentioned that the Commission is looking at Proposition 109. He encouraged people to get involved in getting it passed. He invited people to call him for more information. The ADBSS is working to get their organization involved. The Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation has funded a website in support of the proposition. Monies from the wildlife conservation license plates will be used to fund the website. Seventeen dollars from each license plate goes toward programs for habitat projects and to educate the non-hunting public about the value of hunting. The site will be outdoorheritagearizona.com. It should be up by the end of August. The NRA has pledged \$1 million to help fund the site and for TV and radio ads, but they've not seen the funding as yet.

Farm Bill - Al Eiden reported that they are looking to improve language to add flexibility for EQIP and WHIP. The Department has a good relationship with NRCS. One of the Farm Bill programs is for voluntary public access for which the Department will be applying. Al will provide an update for the December newsletter.

Brian Wakeling mentioned a field guide for juniper treatments by the USGS available on the Oregon State University website. <http://oregonstate.edu/dept/EOARC/pinon-juniper/material/PJ%20Field%20Guide.pdf>
(Warning – very large file – 19 MB)

Twenty-nine blue grouse from Utah were released into Unit 5A today.

Project proposal evaluations should focus more this year on a prioritization process by both the Department and the WCO funding partners.

Set date and time of next meeting in February 2011 – February 18th in Tucson. (tentative - will have to clear date with Chairman Harris.